

Opening Statement before the House Veterans Affairs  
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

by

U.S. Representative Tom Udall of New Mexico

on

H.R. 601, the Native American Veterans Cemetery Act of 2005

April 6, 2006

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee:

I would like to thank you for considering my legislation, H.R. 601, the Native American Veterans Cemetery Act of 2005, and would like to personally thank Chairman Miller for inviting me to testify.

Providing the men and women of the U.S. Armed Services with a final resting place is one of the missions of the Department of Veterans Affairs through the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). NCA maintains 122 national cemeteries including two in my home state of New Mexico, one in Santa Fe and one in Fort Bayard. NCA also provides grants to states for the construction of state cemeteries with ongoing responsibility for the maintenance of the cemetery.

However, one group lacks the opportunity to be buried close to home in a veterans cemetery. Historically, Native Americans have the highest record of service in the armed forces per capita of any ethnic group, and New Mexico ranks fifth in the nation in Native American veterans with a population of 9,800 veterans. Yet, under existing law, tribal governments are ineligible to apply for a state cemetery grant. Thus, honorable soldiers are unable to receive the dignity of burial in a veterans cemetery located on their home land.

My legislation would change that. Under H.R. 601, tribal governments would be put on the same footing as states – consistent with tribal sovereignty – by allowing them to apply for grants to establish, expand or improve tribal veterans cemeteries.

H.R. 601 enjoys broad support. A bipartisan group of forty-six members of the House are cosponsors, five of whom are members of House Veterans Affairs Committee. I would specifically like to thank the ranking member of this subcommittee,

Congresswoman Shelley Berkley, for her support, as well as Congressman Tom Cole of Oklahoma for his strong and early support. State legislatures in both Arizona and New Mexico have passed resolutions in favor of allowing tribal governments to apply for national veterans cemeteries. The Navajo Nation, the largest federally recognized tribe, is a strong supporter, as is the National American Indian Veterans (NAIV) organization. Furthermore, both former Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony Principi and current Secretary Jim Nicholson have expressed strong support, stating that “H.R. 601 would create another means of accommodating the burial needs of Native American veterans who wish to be buried in tribal lands.” I have included with my testimony several letters of support, and would like to ask unanimous consent that these letters be made part of the record.

Mr. Chairman and members of this subcommittee, this bill would give no special treatment and make no special arrangements for tribal governments. It would allow tribal governments the same opportunities as state governments, and by extension would grant Native American veterans the opportunity to be laid to rest close to home. This bipartisan legislation is strongly and widely supported, and I hope for your sincere consideration. At this time, I will be happy to take any questions.